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## Contrasts in American and British dictionary cultures: The view from marketing

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### Abstract

How dictionaries are marketed gives a picture of the ways in which dictionary publishers help to create, support, and maintain the contrasting “dictionary cultures” of the UK and US. Such materials show American dictionaries promoted as a tool for people from all walks of life, able to help in social, educational, and economic advancement. British domestic dictionary promotion, on the contrary, has focused more on the accuracy of the record of the language, with some attention to enjoyment of language. This article draws on archival materials concerning Merriam-Webster and Oxford University Press one-volume dictionaries in the twentieth century and situates them within the context of the culture of the written word in the US and UK.

**Keywords:** advertisement, American lexicography, British lexicography, dictionary culture, history, marketing, Merriam-Webster, Oxford University Press, sociology.

In his 1973 article “The social impact of dictionaries in the UK,” Randolph Quirk warned:

It is hazardous to embark on topics as enmeshed in folklore as the influence of the dictionary or Anglo-American differences; to embark on both simultaneously is little short of foolhardy. (Quirk 1973, 76)

What follows here perhaps breaches the foolhardy border: a rumination on differences in the role of “the dictionary” in British and American culture in the twentieth century and how publishers have contributed to or exploited their national “dictionary cultures” through their dictionary marketing. This breach is in the interest of answering some of the “sociological” questions for lexicography raised by Svensén (2009, 454): “What are the characteristics of the ‘dictionary culture’ of different countries? And is it possible to discern any patterns and tendencies in this respect?”

The term *dictionary culture* here refers not just to the lexicographical culture (how and by whom dictionaries are made) but to the collection of awareness, attitudes, and habits that members of a society have toward dictionaries, and therefore the predominant roles that dictionaries play in the society. Dictionary cultures reflect and contribute to the larger society’s situation concerning language, authority, literacy, education, commerce, and interactions of these and related areas, and the complexes of social values concerning these matters. Lexicographical practices are situated within such cultures, helping to institute those attitudes and habits, reacting to them, and, often, reifying them.

In any discussion of how dictionaries are marketed in the US, an obvious starting point is the nineteenth-century period of Dictionary Wars between the publishers of Webster’s and Worcester’s dictionaries (starting with Noah Webster himself). These sustained and loquacious campaigns gave rise to reams of advertising and published opinion in which each dictionary was

claimed to be better researched, better written, more authoritative, and more widely praised than the competition. The “wars” stemmed from and further contributed to the American expectation that dictionaries are actively marketed, and they continue to be more broadly advertised than British dictionaries intended for the UK market. However, I argue here that there’s more to the differing dictionary cultures than the differences in commercial competitiveness—that the roots of these differences can be found in large part in differing attitudes to the roles for written authority in each culture.

Quirk continues his warning: “Doubtless the dictionary has indeed less symbolic or emotional power in the UK than in America, but if so it is a matter of degree and not of kind; and the difference should not be exaggerated” (1973, 76). While taking his point about exaggeration seriously, I am not convinced by the use of *difference* in the singular. The factors affecting the position of dictionaries in a culture are many and multidimensional. We’re looking at two landscapes rather than a sliding scale between two points. Before turning to the issue of dictionary marketing, some of the features of the landscapes are explored in the following section.

### **Dictionary as tool, trove and talisman**

When I visited Merriam-Webster to do some of the archival research for this paper, two of their editorial staff treated me to the same anecdote. When Robert Burchfield, then editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, visited their offices in 1968, the editors introduced him to Philip Gove’s “Black Books,” the ring-bound editorial bible that set out defining practice for *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*. “But of course you’ll have the same kind of thing at Oxford,” they said to Burchfield. They were as surprised by Burchfield’s negative answer as he had been by Gove’s binders. “But what do you do, then?” the Merriam editors asked. Burchfield replied that the *OED* editors would try to think of a word that’s like the one they were trying to define and then model their entry on that one.

That story is a small-scale example of transatlantic differences in the role of the written word in establishing norms and rules—whether for lexicography, for government, or for life. It starts with the low-church settlers of the American colonies and their belief that Christians must have a direct, personal relationship with God through the Bible. By the end of the seventeenth century, most northern colonies had laws requiring parents to teach their children to read (Monaghan 1988), and by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the United States had the highest literacy rate in the world (Sokoloff and Engerman 2000). When the United States gained independence, the nation created its own bible in the form of a written constitution, breaking with British tradition of an uncoded constitution: an amorphous collection of past laws, treaties, tradition, and precedent.

But even when codified, laws can be ambiguous, and so American courts find other forms of the written word to support their interpretations of the written word. The use of dictionaries in US law courts increased significantly over the course of the twentieth century (Kirchmeier and Thumma 2010, 85), even though their use is increasingly seen as problematic—or indeed a “truly absurd spectacle” (Christy 2006, 66). In the first ten years of the twenty-first century, the US Supreme Court cited 295 dictionary definitions in 225 cases (Kirchmeier and Thumma 2010, 85), which is to say in over 30 percent of the 735 cases heard. Some dictionary entries, however capriciously they are selected from the many competing dictionaries, thus essentially become law.

Contrast this with British law. In 2014, a parliamentary committee considered whether Britain should “modernize” by developing a written, codified constitution. The committee report sums up the case against: a written constitution would be “unnecessary, undesirable, and un-British” (House of Commons 2014, 24). This preference for an amorphous constitution, by which “no Act of Parliament can be unconstitutional, for the law of the land knows not the word or the idea” (Chrimes 1967, 42), calls to mind Winston Churchill’s quip: “The English never draw a line without blurring it.”

This helps explain the difference in dictionary usage in US and UK legal contexts. The UK Supreme Court (UKSC) was only instituted in 2009, before which the House of Lords served as the nation’s highest court. An influential decision by Lord Hoffmann in 1998 reflects an understanding that the written word isn’t the last word and clarifies the position for dictionaries in British legal contexts:

The meaning which a document (or any other utterance) would convey to a reasonable man is not the same thing as the meaning of its words. The meaning of words is a matter of dictionaries and grammars; the meaning of the document is what the parties using those words against the relevant background would reasonably have been understood to mean. The background may not merely enable the reasonable man to choose between the possible meanings of words which are ambiguous but even (as occasionally happens in ordinary life) to conclude that the parties must, for whatever reason, have used the wrong words or syntax. (House of Lords 1997)

In other words, context is everything. There is no simple answer to be found in a dictionary or grammar. And so it is not surprising that in the UKSC’s first 491 decisions, only seventeen (less than 4%) cited dictionary definitions.<sup>1</sup>

The United States was born of the written word. Authoritative documentation was a key tool in uniting a geographically and socially diverse (yet broadly linguistically homogeneous and literate) population in a shared national project. In such a culture, written rules are seen as a tool of democracy: if the rules are written down, whether in the Bible, the Constitution, or *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, then those rules are accessible to the literate masses. With the low-church model of Biblical self-improvement to build on, nineteenth-century Americans felt that “books would transform individuals, almost like a conversion experience” (Kett 1994, 160, quoted in Dolby 2005, 27). We can see that in Rosemarie Ostler’s *Founding Grammars* (2015), which describes grammar books as transformative texts for generations of Americans, including presidents. And as a result of this faith in written authority, we can see the effect of written linguistic prescriptivism on American English. For instance, use of the passive in published US writing dropped over 28 percent between the early 1960s and 1990s (Leech et al. 2009, 148)—which is to say in the wake of the broad adoption of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* as a text for college writing classes and as a self-help manual for aspiring writers (see Garvey 2009). Passive use continues to decline in American English, reliably more so than in British (Baker 2017, 156ff). Other changes led by American English include the resurrection of the subjunctive, increased distinction between *which* and *that* as relative pronouns, and treatment of collective nouns as grammatical singulars (see Baker 2017 and Murphy 2018). All of these could be seen as a greater American tendency to follow written linguistic guidance. Americans don’t

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<sup>1</sup> Calculated by searching for the word “dictionary” in the opinions at <https://www.supremecourt.uk/decided-cases/index.html> in June 2017, then reading to determine whether a dictionary definition was cited in the opinion.

just publish and buy lots of style guides; they (at least those involved in writing, editing, and publishing) seem to read and obey them.

In this context, dictionaries can be seen in the American context as a kind of self-help book—the kind of book that can transform the individual and possibly the language. The American dictionary is “not a remote object to be handled only by an élite,” but “a handy reference work to help [Americans] combat their ‘linguistic insecurity’ and to try and improve their social status” (Béjoint 1994, 55). This was obviously part of Noah Webster’s conception of his work, which, as well as meeting certain philological aims, sought to establish an effective pedagogy for school children, to improve (or *improov*, as he put it in Webster 1790) the spelling system, and to establish a “national language” to bring together the citizens of the disparate colonies (Webster 1789, 397). Separated from (and rejecting) the social classes that determined standards of English in Britain, the American dictionaries of the nineteenth century had to take a clear position on the existence and status of a standard American English. A ready market existed for new dictionary sales, since the US had an expanding and significantly immigrant population. In the twentieth century, Great Britain, with its imperialist history, its Commonwealth, and its proximity to Europe, had more motivation and opportunity to take dictionary “self-help” abroad and to innovate with those markets in mind.

While the notion of the English dictionary as self-help book is certainly not foreign to Britain (witness the eighteenth-century pronouncing dictionaries), the major general-purpose dictionaries of the early twentieth century had more scholarly roots. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (COD), a more commercial by-product of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was spurred on by the appearance of *Chambers’s Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1901; Allen 1986). That competitor was rooted in Chambers’s *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1867; Kaminski 2013). The differences between the homegrown British dictionaries and their American counterparts reveal both the academic pedigree of the British source materials and divergent assumptions about who would use these dictionaries. For instance, while American lexicographers were keen to include scientific and technical vocabulary, Chambers and OUP dictionaries instead included words that appear once or twice in Spencer or Milton—“science being somewhat alien to the scholarly interests of the Oxford élite” (Green 1996, 445).

The emphasis on the literary suits a readership whose interest in words is somewhat passive; the dictionary gives you the words you might read, rather than necessarily the words you might yourself use. The writing and structure of the British general-use dictionaries also reveals lexicographers’ assumptions about who will use their products. Short entries, high use of abbreviation, and little graphic distinction of different senses meant that:

British dictionaries aim at giving the educated user an *aide-mémoire* or a source of philological information, while American dictionaries provide the less educated person with a guide to linguistic usage and a handy source of reference for all sorts of extralinguistic facts. (Béjoint 1994, 65)

And what the lexicographers provide contributes to a dictionary culture where (different sorts of) people tend to look to dictionaries for different reasons. As Jonathon Green (1999, 131) stereotyped it, British dictionary users “like the stories of words – where did such and such come from? – whereas Americans like to know their status – can I use it thus, is it right or wrong?” This literary bent is evident as well in what is considered to be “English” in the two countries’ education systems. In the US, almost every college student takes an English class, not about literature (though some do that too), but about how to communicate in writing. American culture treats *English* like a tool and the dictionary is its manual. In British educational culture, *English*

is the study of literature; the study of the linguistics of English and how to communicate in the language is taught in classes and degrees in “English Language” (see Murphy 2018). In British dictionary culture, then, “English” is often seen as existing in books, and a dictionary is an aid to enjoying it.

Dictionary usage surveys by Quirk (1973) and Greenbaum, Meyer, and Taylor (1984) asked British and American university students (respectively) to reflect upon their dictionary use. They found more American than British students claimed to own a dictionary, probably reflecting the popularity of dictionaries as high-school graduation gifts.<sup>2</sup> Twice as many American students as British reported using their dictionaries at least once a week, typically aiming to find spelling, pronunciation, meaning, or usage advice. British students were less concerned overall with using their dictionaries for such things, but were more apt than Americans to use dictionaries for finding word histories or lexical relations (e.g., synonyms). Of course, these are self-reports reliant on memory, and so they probably suffer from bias—but even if the dictionary habits reported are more imagined than real, they are interesting here because the differences further speak to differing dictionary cultures. That is, how these Americans and Britons *reported* using dictionaries will have been influenced by ambient values and expectations associated with dictionaries. For the American students, dictionaries are at least as much a tool for linguistic production as reception. For the British students, dictionaries were a bit further in the background.

But dictionaries can be as much a good-luck charm as a tool. The stereotyped early American home had two books: the Bible and “the dictionary,” and the relation between them is often noted. An 1845 Methodist review of Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language* instructed that “[i]t should not stand on a higher shelf than the Bible, but it deserves to stand but a little below it, if not at the side of it” (*Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, Hartford, CT, Jan 22, 1845). Standing on the shelf is what many American dictionaries do—and what they did even in the pre-electronic age. Dictionaries given as gifts or passed down from grandparents are held on to. Despite the obsolescence of the sentimentally held dictionary, many owners see little need to supplement their old dictionaries with a new one that reflects current vocabulary and usage. This creates a problem for dictionary marketing. The brand authority of the publisher is undermined by the message “If you have our dictionary, it’s no good. You need to replace it.” What works for fashion marketing doesn’t work for a product whose claim to authority is its accurate representation of a standard language. Since the standard language is perceived as resistant to fads, the old dictionary can seem as good as any to the casual dictionary user.

### **Marketing material in dictionary archives**

To investigate how dictionary publishers have exploited and encouraged their domestic dictionary cultures, I looked for evidence of marketing materials for general-purpose dictionaries from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century. The work focused on two publishing houses: Merriam-Webster (MW) and Oxford University Press (OUP). Merriam-Webster materials were available at two locations. At the Springfield, Massachusetts headquarters, editorial and marketing files were made available to me. The earlier archives of the G. & C. Merriam Company are available at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. At OUP, I was given access to the press’s archives, which included business and editorial materials relating

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<sup>2</sup> In the UK, *graduation* is reserved for university degrees. British students *leave school*, and this transition is not traditionally marked by gift-giving.

to the dictionaries. I concentrated on materials related to the single-volume, general-purpose dictionaries: the *Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD)*, *Pocket Oxford Dictionary (POD)*, and the *New Oxford Dictionary of English (NODE)* at OUP, and at MW the *Collegiate* series and the three editions of *Webster's New International Dictionary (WNID)*. The single-volume criterion means that the dictionaries themselves are not altogether comparable, since as the largest MW product, *WNID* might be thought of as more on par with the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (in size) or the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* (in terms of its status as source material for abridgements). But, for this study, it is a reasonable choice, since *WNID* and the *Collegiate* often share marketing materials and intended audience. Advertisements for the *OED* and its *Shorter* version don't overlap with the *COD* and *POD* materials found, and their intended audiences (especially for the *OED*) differ.

The focus on these publishers was a product of necessity: they were the only ones for which archival material was clearly available. With the dissolution of lexicographical units at publishing houses and with more and more work done remotely and by freelancers, few dictionaries have proper offices. When their corporate or physical situations changed, materials were most likely dumped. Three other dictionary publishers were approached; two reported that past materials had not been saved, and one reported the possible existence of a cupboard of material that moved to new headquarters after a corporate take-over. Unfortunately, that cupboard was not promising enough to warrant the cost of a research trip.

Generalizing about national dictionary cultures from two companies is not a great idea, but given the lack of other archives, it's a practical first step. In many ways the two companies are not comparable. Merriam-Webster has always been a commercial enterprise; since 1964 it has been owned by Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., a privately held company. OUP, on the other hand, is a department of the University of Oxford, and as such is part of a charitable institution with a large endowment. Nevertheless, OUP is very much a commercial establishment, posting £110 million in profit before tax in 2017 (<https://annualreport.oup.com/2018/finances/>).

Still, if one must compare just two publishers from the two countries, then these are the two to study. Their brand names (*Merriam-*)*Webster* and *Oxford* are the best known and are often used in conversation to indicate the ultimate in lexicographical authority. (*Oxford* has the edge there, being the most frequent proper noun before *dictionary* in both American and British corpora [Davies 2008 and 2013].) The incomparability of the two publishers is emblematic of the differences between the two dictionary cultures. MW's lexicographical lineage goes back to Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), whose second edition the company bought the rights to in 1843. Its dictionaries continue in the more encyclopedic style that distinguishes US general-purpose lexicography. Béjoint (1994, 57) describes the British lexicographical scene as "characterized by a long and solid line of traditional dictionaries—mostly those produced by publishers like Chambers and above all, Oxford University Press," contrasted with innovative British dictionaries (e.g., by Collins) born (at least partially) out of the post-war interest in developing an export market of monolingual dictionaries for learners of English. The tradition that OUP and Chambers belong to is a scholarly one, and the assumptions of the scholarly tradition in lexicography bled into their general-purpose dictionaries in the twentieth century—for example, their strong emphasis on literary words and often less-than-user-friendly means of communicating information.

What the publishers keep in their archives also reflects the differences in dictionary culture. The archives at Yale and Springfield include files and files of advertising material—and yet they are still clearly incomplete. (On the internet I could find plenty of twentieth-century

MW advertisements that were not on file in Springfield.) The archives at OUP had much less marketing material, and the nature of the marketing material, as discussed below, was less direct. This could mean: (a) OUP engaged in less marketing than MW in the twentieth century, (b) marketing material was not considered important enough to archive at OUP, or (c) the marketing archives lie elsewhere. Options (a) and (b) may both be true to some extent. My emails to the press's marketing department went unanswered, so we cannot entirely rule out (c). Some Oxford dictionary advertisements can be found via newspaper and periodical archives (Gale 2018, ProQuest 2008, respectively), and these supplement the OUP archive materials in the following discussion. (Unfortunately, the periodicals archive stops at 1934.) MW, but not OUP, advertisements are also easily found in US and UK advertising archives, on eBay.com, and on the websites of advertisement collectors.

Though the available materials differ in time-depth, I have not restricted myself to considering only the dates that match up. The *COD* came onto the scene in 1911 with no need to establish its brand or scholarly credentials — the name of the publishing house (particularly the *Oxford University* part) was enough. Merriam-Webster, on the other hand, entered the twentieth century as a veteran of the Dictionary Wars, having waged battle on every possible front with the goal of establishing their dictionaries as the most trustworthy. MW's marketing in the twentieth century follows on from the themes and habits established in the nineteenth century, and so it makes sense to look at the twentieth century with some reference to that context. While I do mention some twenty-first-century marketing in the following, my concentration on the twentieth century mostly limits this study to print dictionaries and print advertisement.

### Who are dictionaries for?

The main type of marketing material evident in the OUP archives are press releases, mostly promoting Oxford dictionaries as up-to-date with reference to new words. In addition to the (draft or final) press releases in the files, the existence of further press releases is indicated by groups of newspaper clippings that follow new-edition publication dates and use repeated examples, phrasings, and quotations. The archives also contain some advertisements from the trade magazine *The Bookseller*. Through the intermediary of the bookshop buyer or the newspaper editor, these efforts target consumers indirectly, and are aimed to reach only those who go to bookshops or read the types of publications that run news stories about dictionaries. Because they are not targeting the consumer directly, they don't try to convince the consumer that they need a new dictionary. The British Periodicals database (ProQuest) offers a few more advertisements between 1911 and 1934, in the trade magazine *The Bookman* or literary and cultural magazines like *The Athenaeum* and *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*. Further advertisements ran in broadsheet newspapers and at least one tabloid (*The Daily Mail*).

But even when consumers are directly addressed through OUP advertisement, they are given little information about how the dictionary could serve them. Most periodical advertisements simply list the *COD* among OUP's available publications. Where more description is given, it is not always encouraging to the consumer. For instance, a 1911 advertisement for the then-new *COD*, lists its special features:

The **large amount of space** given to the common words.

The copious use of illustrative sentences.

The **curtest** possible treatment of words that are either common or fitter for an encyclopedia.



The free admission of colloquial, facetious, and slang expressions.

The words, or senses of words, given are **meant to be** such only as are current, **but “current” is an elastic term.**

(Advertisement in *The Saturday Review*, July 15, 1911, p. 91; emphasis added)

None of these features are sold very hard and they suffer from what Geoffrey Pullum (2008) calls “nerdview”—writing that suits the perspective of the professional specialist, not the consumer they are trying to communicate with. Nerdview can be seen, for example, in the description of how much *space* is given for common words, rather than how much information is given about them or the usefulness of the definitions. The list ends on the qualification that this so-titled *Dictionary of Current English* can’t be trusted to be *current* on the reader’s understanding of the term. While OUP shows sensitivity to the way the languages work and the limitations of dictionaries in recording them, it’s not an approach that shouts “buy me!” to the lexicographically uninitiated.

OUP’s managed distance from its potential consumers is illustrated by correspondence among manager and editors in 1926, after an Oxford alumnus named Hughman wrote to point out that other dictionaries were sponsoring newspaper crossword competitions and benefiting from the “free” publicity. Hughman offered his services as a crossword compiler. Memos among the OUP staff note the positive effects that puzzle sponsorship had had on Cassell’s dictionary sales. But when OUP’s publicity manager introduced the suggestion to other staff, he didn’t feel that it was a direction OUP could take:

The problem is a very real one and we are trying to amass some evidence which will help us to formulate a plan of action. Meanwhile here is Mr. Hughman’s suggestion, but I doubt whether our dignity will permit us to make use of it. (memo from Gerard Hopkins to Secretary, 11 Nov 1926; file COD/M/1/105)

An arrow is drawn from the word *dignity* to a handwritten response at the bottom of the page:

“No—we may have to do undignified things, but not openly.” A 1976 addendum to this correspondence wryly notes “still being considered.”<sup>3</sup> At that point, crossword puzzles were no longer a new fad. A press release (embargo date: 22 July 1976) announcing *COD6* makes much of the scientific background and crossword puzzle championships of the new editor, J. B. Sykes. But the press release has only one acknowledgment of dictionary users:

Every year more than 300,000 copies of this, the middle-sized dictionary in the Oxford family, are sold, and 300,000 new owners turn to it to settle arguments about spelling or pronunciation or meaning. (OUP archives)

Most of the press release is six paragraphs about new words in the dictionary (the final two focusing on slang), before concluding that *COD* lexicographers will continue to be “recording the latest innovations in the language to add to future printings of the dictionary.” This is typical of the OUP publicity’s emphasis on the importance of a *record* of the language, with very little on what purposes that record might be put to. The mention of argument-settling gives the picture of people who are fairly confident in their use of the language arguing about its finer points.

By contrast, the marketing materials in the Yale and Springfield MW archives contain large numbers of direct advertisements to the consumer, as well as promotional materials for the sales force to present to bookshops, schools, and businesses. Direct advertisements were placed in popular magazines, including *People* (celebrity news), *Reader’s Digest* (general-interest), and

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<sup>3</sup> This handwritten note, paper-clipped to the original correspondence, was probably written by an archivist (Peter Gilliver, personal correspondence).

*Popular Mechanics* (targeted at men interested in technology and DIY).<sup>4</sup> The placement of advertisements is determinedly anti-elitist, appealing to “people like you”:

People like you take pride in owning the world’s greatest reference book.

We know, because we asked hundreds of owners of Webster’s New International Dictionary, Second Edition. Readers of *Time*, like you. People who try to give their families every possible advantage. (Ad for *WNID2*, MW archives)

MW advertisements are about the user as much as (and often more than) about the dictionary. They are not shy about saying that everyone, from every walk of life, should have their dictionary. This inclusivity can be seen in a *Webster’s International Dictionary* advertisement directed to “the farmer’s family” (Figure 1, ca. 1885).

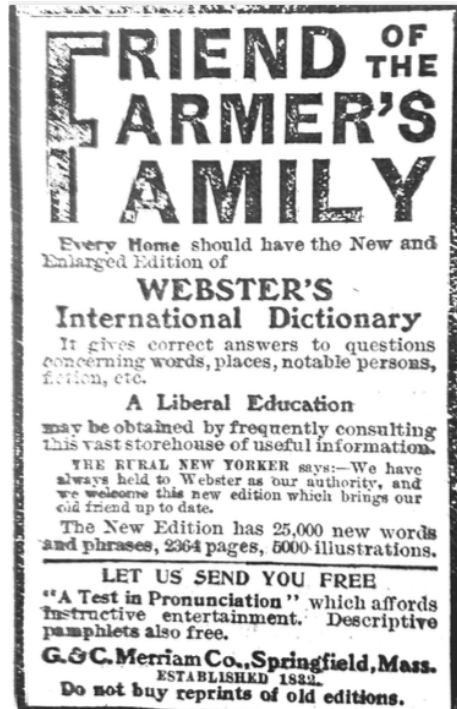


Figure 1. Periodical advertisement, ca. 1885 (Beinecke Library, Yale)

A 1961 press release for its descendant emphasized that *WNID3* can be enjoyed by “Students, Housewives and Business Men as well as Scholars” (Merriam-Webster files). These ads work hard to send the message that the dictionary is for everyone, and they do so by naming the “everyones” the dictionary would suit.

Merriam-Webster’s long-time (1980–2016) publisher John Morse has called the dictionary “the quintessential democratic document” (quoted in Finegan 2017). That is one way to view even the prescriptive bents of US dictionary publishing—offering the same language to everyone from housewives to scholars, allowing everyone, from the farmer to the businessman, access to the standard code. Obviously, MW’s aim is to shift more dictionaries and make more money, but in doing so they help to maintain a dictionary culture in which dictionaries are not remote, scholarly objects, but tools for any American.

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<sup>4</sup> The placement of advertisements was not always clear from the materials on file, which include unmarked clippings from newspapers and magazines and pre-publication galleys.

### What the dictionary can do for you

MW marketing taps hard into the American dream, that story of social mobility through hard work and determination. That American dream presupposes competition, which is “the primary method among Americans for motivating members of groups” (Stewart and Bennett 1991, 79). There’s only so much room at the top, and some people have more advantage through family circumstances or natural talent. The dictionary can be the great leveler, giving you more security in your use of English so that you can be more secure in your social climb.

The competitiveness of that social climb is clear in MW advertising throughout the twentieth century. In the 1910s, *WNIDI* was promoted via magazine “ad-stories” (what we’d now call *advertorials*) directed at parents of school-age children. One that ran with a picture of a clear-eyed elementary-school-age boy reads:

Why not give your boy and girl an opportunity to make their *home study* easy and effective? Give them the same chances to win promotion and success as the lad having the advantage of **Webster’s New International Dictionary** in his home [discussed in *Advertising and Selling*, 20 Dec. 1919, p. 5; emphasis as in original]

You can’t let your child fall behind the rich one who already has *WNIDI* in their home—you must keep up with the Joneses and have the same state-of-the-art dictionary. Otherwise, twenty years from now, they’ll be stuck in a dead-end job. Similarly, a 1961 advertisement in *LIFE* magazine implies that failure at competition is what causes students to drop out of college, while using the *New Collegiate* may prevent such failure:

1,800,000 high-school graduates will soon be moving on to college. Or new jobs. They’ll be up against stiff competition. (At some colleges 40% of the freshmen drop out by year’s end.) To be successful anywhere they’ll need to be able to talk, write, and read with accuracy and understanding.

These abilities develop quickly with regular use of Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary: The *Merriam-Webster*. (Advertisement in *LIFE*, 19 May 1961, p. 97; emphasis as in original)

Such ads promote MW dictionaries as gifts for students or graduates—a gift that will make a difference.

These advertisements are pushed to everyone, not just those who are thought to already enjoy words and reading. Figure 2 shows a 1972 ad that appeared in *TV Guide*, one of the best-selling and least literary magazines of its time. (It also appeared in *LIFE* and probably other magazines.) The ad explicitly addresses social mobility by contrasting the same model dressed and equipped for blue-collar and white-collar work. The blue-collared version holds the handle of a work tool (a shovel?), while the white-collared version holds the red-covered *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, the only color element of the otherwise black-and-white ad. It is headlined “ONE OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A WHITE COLLAR AND A BLUE COLLAR COULD BE A RED JACKET.”

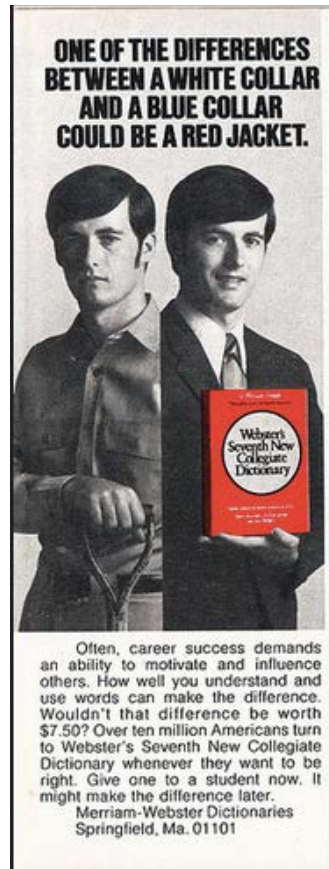


Figure 2. Advertisement in *TV Guide*, 9 September 1972

The advertisements give the sense that the dictionary user is always in competition; you need a dictionary so that you can compete with others at school, on the job market, on the career ladder—or even at war. Taglines in Merriam-Webster advertisements during World War I ran on the theme of “Are You Equipped to Win?” and made clear that including new words in the dictionary was not merely a matter of keeping a record of the language, but of equipping Americans for personal, or perhaps even national, victory:

**Are You and Yours Equipped to Win?**

Do the new words as *Bolsheviki*, *barrage*, *Boche*, *camouflage*, *vitamine*, *junior high school*, *ace*, *fourth arm*, *ukulele*, *escadrille*, *tank* and many others convey their true meaning to you? Can you pronounce them?

(undated advertisement for *Webster's New International Dictionary* from MW files; part of a series that ran around 1915–1917; see Pope 1980)

The equation of MW products with competition and success continues. Their 2017 catalogue cover shows a road reaching from the reader into the distance—the future—with a dictionary entry for *auspicious* overlaid, including the definition “showing or suggesting that future success is likely.”

Where OUP advertising refers to competition, it is their products that are competing, not the dictionary user. For example, an advertisement in *The Daily Mail* (August 18, 1983) shows *COD* with a referee's whistle and the headline “Best ref in the game” with, in smaller print, “In the reference game, Oxford win!” This is the only text about the dictionary in the

advertisement—a contrast to the wordy, explanatory style of MW. A later advertisement in *The Independent* (November 1, 1989) takes a similar sporty theme, with a laurel wreath above the *COD* declaring Oxford “CHAMPIONS OF THE LANGUAGE.” The short (twenty-eight-word) paragraph below the wreath makes no reference to dictionary users but notes Oxford’s “winning way with words” and the *COD*’s status as “the foremost single-volume authority on current English.” MW ads also reliably refer to their brand as the most authoritative, but they don’t treat that as sufficient reason to buy their dictionary—they focus on how their product will help the consumer.

MW puts its dictionaries into competition with others too—sometimes more literally than OUP. One MW advertisement proposes:

**A conclusive ‘see for yourself’ test** Tomorrow take this advertisement into your book, department, or stationery store.

See if you can find *epoxy* or *malaguena* (we could go on) in any desk dictionary but the just-off-the-press Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate. (Ad, ca. 1965, MW files)

MW advertising not only focuses on competition, it invents new ways to be competitive. Consumers are asked to compete *with each other* to be “BE THE FIRST TO GIVE THE FIRST completely new dictionary in ten years” (7<sup>th</sup> Collegiate ad, ca. 1965, MW files).

### Dictionary as commercial tool

The historian Jan Schulte Nordholt noted that one of the earliest and most persistent European stereotypes of Americans was that “everything there was determined by money and everything could be had for a price” (1986, 9). MW (as contrasted to OUP) advertising seem to live up to the stereotype, with MW focused on what dictionaries can do for individuals’ earning power (as shown above) and what dictionaries can do for business.

Business and competition are matters of pride in the US, but more reluctantly discussed in polite, academic British culture. The differing attention to business arises naturally from the two publishers’ histories. For Noah Webster, the dictionary was (part of) his business; he needed its success to pay his bills. When George and Charles Merriam took over as publishers, their interest was in commercial dominance of their product (hence their escalation of the Dictionary Wars). OUP lexicography, on the other hand, started with a scholarly mission and only entered competitive dictionary publishing in the twentieth century.

In the OUP archives, I found little that linked its dictionaries to businesses other than the book-selling business: advertisements in *The Bookseller* in 1986, for example, refer to the *Little Oxford Dictionary* as “one of our top bookshop moneyspinners” and to their range of “mini dictionaries” as “handy and authoritative reference books for the impulse buyer.” Where users are mentioned in OUP publicity, they are not identified as executives or secretaries. The only business-related promotion I could find in the OUP archives was from a campaign in the 1980s, when OUP partnered with IBM to promote IBM computer diskettes. With the purchase of fifty or more diskettes from IBM, one could receive a free special-edition hardcover *COD*. A picture of the dictionary adorns the front of a four-sided leaflet (probably a newspaper insert) with the headline “The first name in diskettes brings you the first name in dictionaries.” The leaflet text spells out all the reasons you should want the diskettes for yourself or your company, and at the back there is an order form for the diskettes with a box to “Please tick if you are claiming your free dictionary.” While the leaflet mentions Oxford’s authority a couple of times (as well as IBM’s work with OUP to digitize the *OED*), it gives only one reason for possibly wanting the *COD*: “if your present computer system doesn’t have a *spell-check* facility (as many IBM

systems do), you won't be completely lost for words." As in the 1911 advertisement that dithered about the currency of *COD*'s "current English," this promotion seems to advertise the dictionary's imminent obsolescence—mentioning no other use for dictionaries than spell-checking: a function that IBM computers already do.

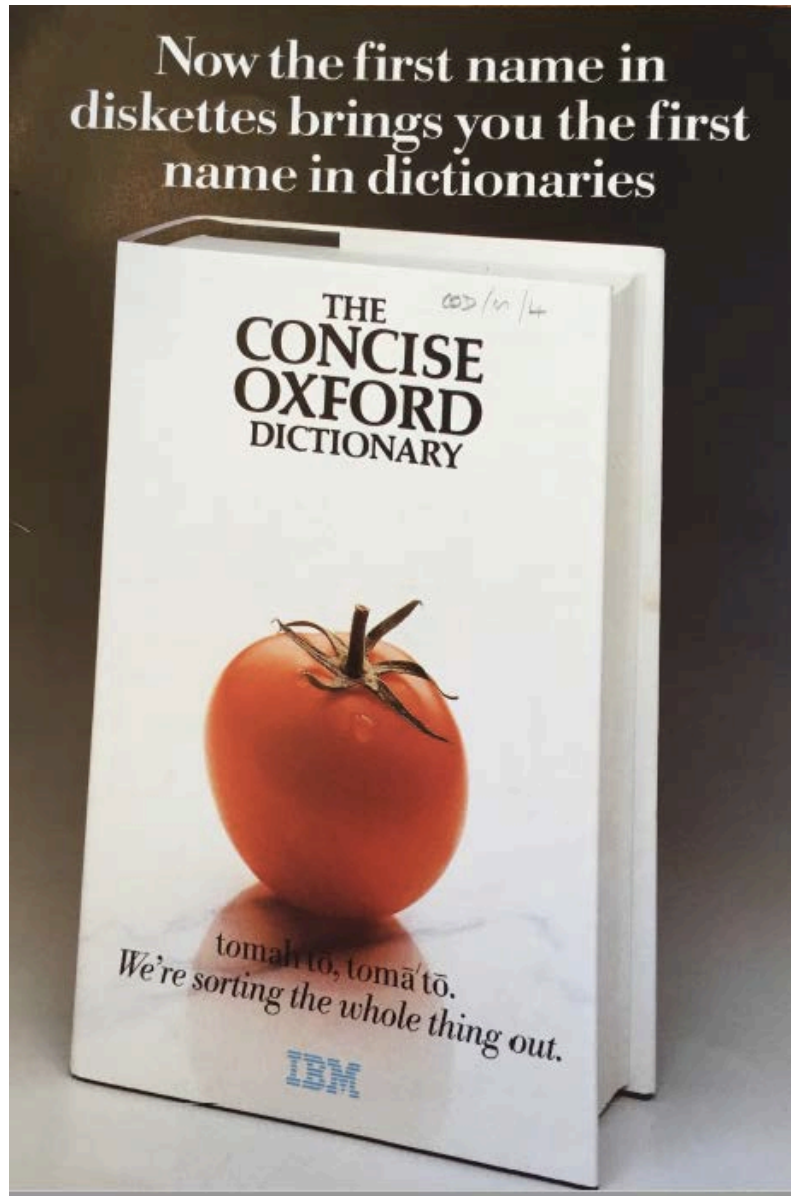


Figure 3. IBM-COD promotional leaflet (by permission of the Secretary to the Delegates of Oxford University Press )

At least since *Webster's International Dictionary* (1890), work life has been a feature of MW's advertisements. Offices (along with school, home, and libraries) are mentioned as places where the company's dictionaries ought to be found, and professionals and businesspeople are noted as potential dictionary users. In the 1950s and 60s, these mentions become much more frequent and well organized. MW sales forces approached companies directly, and marketing materials for direct sales to businesses promoted "S.D.P.: Strategic Dictionary Placement." To be

strategic about dictionary placement, companies should have a Collegiate at each desk and an unabridged in a central location on each floor, on a dictionary stand that you could buy from MW in several attractive styles. This, the materials claimed, would save your business's money and reputation because you could avoid the situation in which "You lose \$2.49 (IBM study) every time a letter goes wrong. You lose even more in prestige and effectiveness when a letter goes out with errors" (SDP leaflet, MW files).

### Dictionaries as literary pleasure

With the publication of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1961), MW employed a new public relations firm and took new advertising directions (Skinner 2012). The first press release noted usage of new words by movie stars, politicians, the gossip columnist Polly Adler, and the crime novelist Mickey Spillane. And, famously, it quoted the new entry for the word *ain't*, noting its use "in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers," thus inciting a media frenzy against their own product.

Editor Philip Gove took *WNID3* a bit more in the direction of British publications like *COD*, sacrificing user-friendliness (e.g., with the extensive use of abbreviation) and pursuing a more academic orientation to the recording of language. The less prescriptivist bent meant that marketing efforts needed to change too, with an increased focus on leisure and enjoyment of the language: "Now There's An Entirely New Concept of Recreation In An Area Where You'd Least Expect It – An Entirely New Kind Of Unabridged Dictionary That's Planned To Be Read For Pleasure"; "make adventuring with words a daily part of family recreation" (September 1961 press releases, MW files).<sup>5</sup> This message comes out in 1961 Christmastime advertising for *WNID3*, where it is "the Cadillac of dictionaries" for "[a]nyone who reads a lot, writes a lot— anyone who enjoys word games and puzzles." Another advertisement is more frank in its move from the "democratic" approach typical of MW advertising: "Webster's Third New International Dictionary. It's not a gift for everyone." Early *WNID3* ads picture engrossed dictionary owners with the gigantic book on their laps, reading it as they would read a novel (MW files), rather than at desks or gathered round in a family group, as was common in other MW advertisements.

The media uproar about *WNID3*'s more descriptive tack (see Sledd and Ebbitt 1962) meant the company needed to retrieve some of its reputation. In contrast to the 1961 "not for everyone" ad, another (dated 1962 by a vintage ad dealer<sup>6</sup>) returns to the self-help/competition message, promoting *WNID3* as a Christmas gift: "the one dictionary that will put your family in command of today's English." But that message had never really gone away, as the utility of MW products was continually promoted in advertising for the Collegiate and in the "Strategic Dictionary Placement" promotions, which sold both Collegiates and the unabridged *WNID3*.

In contrast to its reception in the US, coverage of *WNID3* in the British press was "largely favourable" (Gilliver 2016, 469), probably because the dictionary's ideals were familiar

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<sup>5</sup> "Enjoyment" is not entirely absent from previous editions' campaigns, especially when advertising the dictionary as a gift. But while a 1920 newspaper advertisement (MW files) starts with "How much this vast fund of information will be enjoyed in your home!", it quickly moves on to promising "the wise parent" that *WNID1* will be useful for schoolwork and belongs in "every home, school, and office."

<sup>6</sup> The information about the date was probably based on the magazine the ad was cut from. <https://www.vintage-adventures.com/vintage-education-ads/4711-1962-merriam-webster-dictionary-ad-this-christmas.html> [Accessed August 11, 2018]

from traditional British lexicography: description of current usage as part of a historical record of the language, with the dictionary assumed to be most relevant to avid readers.

Appeals to the linguistic-literary leisure class are not uncommon in UK dictionary promotion. OUP has achieved this through focused advertisement in literary magazines and academic journals. In the twenty-first century, the leisure association can also be seen in other publishers' marketing. Chambers styles itself as "For Word Lovers." In the cover quote on the thirteenth edition, public intellectual Melvyn Bragg holds that *The Chambers Dictionary* "stands out like a baroque mansion in a city of faceless concrete" — a description based in aesthetic language rather than on usefulness or authority and, as a marketing tool, one only for people who know or care who Melvyn Bragg is. (Also quoted on Chambers' website are literary novelist Ali Smith and broadcaster and author Jeremy Paxman, who presents the television program *University Challenge*, as well as political talk shows.) The cover of the 2010 printing of the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* proclaims it is "The Language Lover's Dictionary/including over 200 essays on literature and language." Both Collins and Chambers have published the official Scrabble dictionaries for UK play and have extensive word-game resources on their websites. With its scholarly stature to uphold, OUP tends not to get involved in the *love* and *leisure* talk, instead referring to their reputation in the tagline "world's most trusted dictionaries," which appears on covers, websites, and advertisements. (MW also uses the "most trusted" line, but limits the scope of their claim: "America's most trusted ...."<sup>7</sup>)

### **Appeals to authority, as authority**

Appeals to authority have always been a major theme of MW advertising. During the nineteenth-century Dictionary Wars, MW produced copious pamphlets and advertisements that listed the voluble praise of eminent people from eminent institutions who used MW dictionaries (Beinecke Library collection). Those quoted included religious leaders as well as representatives of state courts, legislatures, and boards of education, for which the approbations were presented alphabetically by state, so that the reader could easily find their state of residence and be assured that they would be buying the right dictionary for studying or working there. Mention of state and other authorities continued in advertisements of the twentieth century, tailing off as the century progressed. These appeals to outside authorities are part and parcel of promoting the dictionary as a self-help book for real-world competition. If you can learn the language that is sanctioned by these authorities, then you can more easily fit into their institutions and the world of work and study. With *WNID3*, MW appeared to distance itself somewhat from the notion of the dictionary as the authority that will determine and tell people what is good or bad, fact or fiction in the language. But even in an advertisement that pictures a woman leisurely reading the dictionary in a well-appointed home library, space on the page is dedicated to the assurance that MW dictionaries have been "accepted as the ultimate word authority by libraries, universities, courts, and the U.S. Government Printing Office for generations" ("Today this new Library of the English Language belongs in your personal library" ad, MW files).

MW is not the only US publisher to take advantage of organizational authorities' use of their dictionaries. The front cover of *Webster's New World Dictionary* proclaims it "OFFICIAL DICTIONARY OF *The Associated Press Stylebook*" (fourth [1999] and fifth [2014] editions and, with different wording, the third edition [1989]). The approval of other authorities lends

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<sup>7</sup> The "America's most trusted" claim is found in various places in their marketing, including <https://www.merriam-webster.com/about-us> [Accessed August 20, 2018]



credence to the claim that the dictionary itself is an authority—the linguistic authority that other authorities turn to.

OUP ads, as we've seen, often say or imply that their products are the best or most trusted, but rarely appeal to other authorities to claim their own authority. The marketing materials (book jackets or press releases) are more likely trying to build authority by reporting on their lexicographic methods (e.g., reliance on a corpus). In such cases, the implicit claim is not that Oxford has the most correct or approved-of lexical information but that it has *descriptive* power. Indeed, press materials for the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (NODE, 1998) described it as “a landmark in the description of English.” A minor recent exception to the external-authority rule is in the current OUP catalogue webpage for the *New Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors* (2014), which says the book is endorsed by the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (an organization that is probably known only to professional writers and editors).

At the end of the twentieth century, OUP marketing showed more willingness to make authoritative proclamations about language. The *NODE* front cover describes it as “the foremost authority” and has the tagline was “New Oxford, New English” as well as the OUP slogan “The World’s Most Trusted Dictionaries.” The fine print on the back makes clear that its “[c]ontemporary rules of good usage” are based on corpus examination of current usage. Press and promotional materials for the dictionary took on a more authoritative, but not conservative, tone, declaring, for example, that infinitives may be split.<sup>8</sup> In coverage of competition between OUP, Chambers, and Collins, the *Independent* newspaper labeled the infinitive-splitting proclamation a “stunt,” then declared all their marketing claims “absurd” (Marks 1998). The member of OUP staff who shared these materials with me expressed some embarrassment at them, and OUP shied away from expressing *NODE*’s authority in such specific ways when marketing further editions.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have looked at some of the themes of dictionary marketing in the United Kingdom and the United States. The marketing trends reflect Béjoint’s observation that, in contrast to British dictionaries, “The American dictionary is an object that is advertised and sold, and that has a place in the competitiveness of American society” (1996: 56). It also tells something of a story about the interrelations of lexicography and social class in the two countries. Whereas American publishers push their dictionaries to everyone, marketing general-use dictionaries as tools of social mobility, British publishers tend to communicate with and about the more “literary” classes. American dictionaries are pitched to the aspirational, British ones to the elite.

The dictionary culture is located in a broader culture, and the broader culture’s values are enacted in the dictionary culture. The UK and the US, while sharing broad values and much cultural history, have many subtle differences that contribute to their dictionary cultures and their advertising cultures. The overt competitiveness and explicit claims of American advertisements would generally be considered not in the best taste in “polite British culture” (for which we might read ‘middle-class English culture’), where modesty is a stronger social value than self-promotion (see Fox 2014). Hard-sell advertising, including detailed claims for the superiority of one’s product, is more socially acceptable in the US. Such methods may even turn off the British

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<sup>8</sup> The *NODE* promotional materials I saw came not from the OUP archive but from the current files at Oxford Dictionaries, shared with me by current staff.

consumers that OUP wants to reach, since “soft sell” is the preferred advertising mode in the UK (Bradley, Hitchon, and Thorson 1994). MW’s appeals to competition suit their market: “Americans, with their orientation toward individualism and achievement, respond well to [competition]” (Stewart and Bennett 1991, 79).

This is all tied up in the two countries’ attitudes to social class. In the US, one’s social class is viewed (despite ample evidence to the contrary) as eminently escapable. Americans largely take to heart the belief that a good work ethic is all one needs to better one’s economic position, and that a change in economic position brings change in social position. In Britain, on the other hand, economic position and social class are more separate, with social capital playing a particularly important role in which social class you’re assigned to (see, e.g., Savage et al. 2013). British dictionary advertising approaches the middle classes,<sup>9</sup> and does not propose that members of the working class try to convert. This is related to both the perceived unseemliness of social climbing and what can be described (from an American perspective) as a mild fatalism about one’s lot in life.

In the case of linguistic self-improvement, perhaps the British situation calls for more fatalism than the American. In the UK, accent is one of the key markers of social class and “Standard” English, whereas in the US “standardness” (in public discussions of the matter at least) is more tied up with avoiding certain words and grammatical forms (Milroy 2000)—the kinds of things that are more easily represented in dictionaries and “corrected” in individuals. An accent, on the other hand, is something that is more essential to oneself and harder to modify—especially with a written reference book. While American “standardness” is easily explained in rules, even the grammatical aspects of British “standardness” are often phrased in terms of “having a good ear” rather than having learned an invariable standard form (see Murphy 2018, chapters 6 and 8). Given those standard British assumptions about standard English, advertisements that claim a dictionary can transform your language (and therefore your life) might invite disbelief or mockery.

Because I have concentrated on Merriam-Webster and Oxford, I’ve no doubt represented the most extreme differences between the two countries. The two publishing houses have different advertising needs, with Oxford able to rely on the academic cachet of its name, while MW must constantly defend its corner as “the authentic Webster.” OUP’s status as a university department and the academic mission of much of its lexicography mean that it is more limited in what it can be seen to do in marketing, even before we factor in the British versus American differences. And even these extreme cases don’t always play to character type. There are always exceptions to the generalizations made in this paper; that is why they are generalizations and not rules. Nevertheless, the tendencies described here are pronounced and, as shown to some extent, they are found in the marketing of other British and American publishers. For that reason, these styles of dictionary marketing can be viewed as symptoms of the dictionary cultures of those countries. And since marketing exists to represent and persuade, the marketing styles continually help to re-create and entrench those dictionary cultures.

This study’s concentration on print dictionaries and print advertisement gives a picture of where current dictionary culture has come from. With dictionary usage now largely online, dictionary advertisement must take different forms—for example, through search-engine optimization and social media. In this context, it becomes more difficult to keep the domestic and the international separate, and one can see UK dictionary promotion as being more focused

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<sup>9</sup> See Murphy 2018: 204–206 on the British *middle classes* versus the American *middle class*.

on learners of English internationally, while US companies still often seem to focus on the domestic market (with social-media commentary on American political events, for example). We are left with the question: (how) have the historical differences in US–UK dictionary cultures shaped their online marketing presences? Perhaps this article can serve as a starting point for such a study.

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